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ABSTRACT

Arguing that to consider only the writer's mental processes is an intellectualist view of the composing process that does not present a fully human way of knowing, this paper takes the position that the writer is more than a mind at work and that an account of the writer as knower must include a consideration of the interaction between mind and experience. The paper supports this position by using a phenomenological approach, which views language not only as a means of communication but as a way of creating worlds, fashioning meaning, and sharing experiences. In conclusion, the paper shows that, based on this holistic view of the writer as knower, expressive writing used in the invention stage is a natural heuristic, leading to knowledge that is both self-specific and subject-specific. (FL)

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Writing as a Way of Knowing - A Phenomenological View

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Writing as a Way of Knowing - A Phenomenological View

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This presentation offers a slightly broader view of the writer as knower than is usually assumed in much of our literature and in many composition texts. We take the position that the writer is more than a mind at work and that an account of the writer as knower (or writing as a way of knowing) must include a consideration of mind and experience and the interaction of both these aspects of the whole person. To consider only the writer's mind and his mental processes is an intellectualist view that does not present a fully human way of knowing. We rely on phenomenology and the phenomenological approach to language use as the basis of our position. In addition, our account may be seen as an explanation of the assumptions underlying the process-oriented approach to the teaching of composition. Last, we show that, based on our holistic view of the person as writer as knower, expressive writing used in the invention stage is a natural heuristic, leading to knowledge that is both self-specific and subject-specific.

We employ phenomenology in two ways. First, we mean with Martin Nystrand, James Britton and others that we use language not only to communicate but also to create our world, to fashion meaning, and to shape our experience. This creative ability, found uniquely in our language capacity, is what is meant by phenomenology as it applies to language production.

This view of person--as creator in language--developed from the philosophical account of the person, as offered by contemporary phenomenologists. According to Ernst Cassirer, the person is not <u>animal rationale</u> but <u>animal symbolicum</u>. From rational animal to symbol making

animal is a daring shift in perspective replacing the idea that "person" means spectator in the world with "person" as active knower/participant, a creator of experience, including art, religion, myth, morality, language, and one's self. The phenomenological view parts company with the intellectualist position, still prevalent today, that a person is first and foremost a thinker (a rational animal), a being who interacts with and knows his world through his reason, the implication being that the world reached through reason is higher and more real than ever-changing experience. (It is assumed to be more real because it is unchanging.) The dualism inherent in this view--that one knows what is true with his mind but not his senses--has fostered a kind of false intellectualism in Western thought, in which the whole person has dropped out of our consideration of the way we know--and, thus, live. While intellect is a distinctive element in what it means to be a person, it is not an intellect or a mind that thinks. It is a person who thinks. And the truth that one finds is found not by abandoning the world of experience for another realm, but by creating one's world through language.

Phenomenology, then, affirms the integrity of the person by calling for a return to experience, really a call for a reconstruction of experience. It views the creation of the world as an ongoing interactive process, leading to a product--language produced--but always returning to the process of successive reconstructions of experience.

It may be constructive to pause here to think for a moment of the epistemological assumptions underlying the product-oriented and process-oriented approaches to teaching composition. In the product-oriented approach there is emphasis on fairly certain knowledge about one's point before one writes. The writer's focus in a paper is not

discovered in the process; rather it must exist in mind before he actually writes, as if the writing were merely a recording of the knower/writer's thought. In the process-oriented approach, meaning is developed in the process of writing. It is the writing that uncovers the meaning. To adapt Martin Nystrand's terms: the process-oriented approach leads to heuristic acts--discoveries; whereas the product-oriented approach employs explicative acts--explanations of something already known.

If language is our way of creating (knowing) the real, if language is our way of successively transforming our real, how does this occur in writing? We have all heard the expression that putting our experience in words objectifies that experience. One interpretation of that saying is that the writing itself is a creation; it is a new object in the world. There is another sense to that expression, which gets closer to a full philosophical account of the creative and knowing act involved in writing. Elements of my experience exist, before expression, only contingently--that is, as elements of my experience. To take on real existence, in and of themselves, they must be cut loose from me. That is, they must be rendered absolute, literally, absolved from me. This occurs uniquely in writing when my experience is apprehended by me as existing for me and others. My experience, transformed in writing, is recognized as existing for others because it has been lifted to the realm of written discourse. It then takes on meaning that is quantitatively broader and qualitatively deeper. Quantitatively it is broader because now others may know my experience. Qualitatively it is deeper because I have seen it for others--by putting it in a uniquely human form. Once expressed, my experience returns to me able again to reinform successive transformations and itself be transformed. The process

is ongoing and reciprocal within the person and from person to person. But the process of creating in writing is the process of learning through language. The kind of learning involved is holistic--the mind and experience of the person are one.

Several years ago, Robert Zoellner, in "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," warned that we had accepted as gospel an instrumental metaphor that equated "the act of thought with the act of writing." Of course, Zoellner wished to break that metaphor and to have us accept the idea that writing was not thinking--instead that writing must be located in a feeling, living, breathing person. Ultimately, Zoellner proposes that thought "is entirely skeletomuscular." While we may not agree with him on that, we do agree that writing is a process that emanates from the whole person. It is for this reason and the others already given that we propose that expressive writing used in the invention stage is a natural heuristic because expressive writing "stays close to the self, close to the speaker," as James Britton describes it. As such, it is writing as exploration, free from the demands of formal discourse, freeing the writer to probe deeply his primary experience, there to discover what he knows about self and subject. As James Britton puts it: "expressive writing reveals as much about the writer as about his subject," precisely because it is close to the person and free from the demands of more mediated utterance. More mediated forms of discourse will lead to knowledge that is self and subject specific only if the writer freely and expressively explores and shapes his experience from the start of the writing process.

Britton, in his essay, "Language And Experiences," discusses hikes he, as a youngster, took with his brother. He explains that they drew

a map of a particular area in which they often hiked, and with each hike they added to the map. In addition to the map, Britton's brother drew pictures of scenes in the area. Neither the map, continually added to and corrected, nor the pictures were the area; both were representations of the real area and both could stimulate the recall of different realities of the area in the minds and memories of the two boys. Britton suggests that everyone recreates representations of reality based on their experience, "...and from this representation, this cumulative record of our own past, we generate expectations concerning the future; expectations which, as moment by moment the future becomes the present, enable us to interpret the present."

To communicate that inner reality and the interpretation of the present, we must urge that experience into the solid of language, the structure of utterance. Whatever is personal or abstract--the abstraction of thought or feeling or memory, for example--establishes a new reality when uttered in language forms. Thus, one gains here an additional insight into E. M. Forster's famous statement, "I do not know what I think until I see what I have said."

We see a line beginning with the individual and extending outward through language to create a new reality. The new creation, however, is not the same as that which previously existed in abstract form in the language user's mind; it is different. It is sharper, clearer, for the most part and, of course, set in the formal structure of the utterance itself. If that utterance is vocal, the structure--that form of words and syntactical relationships--has a momentary existence (unless electrically recorded). If the utterance is written, it is fixed in time and space until read by another person who in abstracting the mean-

ing from the formal structure creates another abstract reality. This matter of the clarification and sharpening of the perception through the utterance is supported by Henri Bergson who said "Nothing is clear until we have put it into words, for words are the only means of translating impressions to the intellect. Hence, the immense help expression gives to vision, in clarifying it. The growth of language is not merely a technical development, it implies a growth of vision." Just as Bergson's comment asserts the line extending outward from the individual language user, it opens the way for the line to proceed inward, into the individual to the abstracting or creating processes themselves. Thus, we assert that writing, here the clarification of impressions, also acts as a heuristic to produce further generation of impressions and information. Zoellner asserts the connection between the vocal utterances and formal written composition; what we are suggesting here is a sort of middle ground between the momentary form of vocal expression and the formally conscious structures of written production--those "finished" pieces of writing which conform to most of the accepted conventions of written expression such as usage, spelling syntax and the like. What we assert is that free writing, this middle ground, when practiced in the incubation stage of the natural writing process, which leads of gains in learning which have three major forms.

It is important to see here that free writing is a middle ground, and thus a type of link between the purely personal, affective world of the self and the predominately public world which is addressed in organized writing. Britton, in his book The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18, uses the term EXPRESSIVE to describe "utterance at its most relaxed and intimate, as free as possible from outside demands.

whether those of a task or of an audience." This, he asserts, is the starting point of language and out of it will develop as the person matures as a writer, the tripartite modes of language: transactional (that which is used in one's dealings with others, formal structured language molded to a considerable degree by the requirements and expectations of the writer's vision of task and/or audience), expressive (that private language use; "a verbalization of the speaker's immediate preoccupations and his mood of the moment (82)." The third mode Britton establishes here is the poetic, the mode of language use in which the language is used to create a new reality for its own sake.

Thus, free writing forms that bridge between the expressive and transactional use of language; in Britton's terms again, the speaker when using this sort of language can move reasonably easily from the two rolls, that of participant and that of spectator. When this is used in the incubation stage of the writing process, the writer has the greater opportunity to develop greater insights into content, form and self because she is able to operate freely and to move from one language-user role to the other.

The incubation stage of the writing process, Britton states, makes two great demands upon the writer: one is that the writer feels a need to get the thinking right in terms of the outside world. That is to say, the incubating writer must understand the relationship between the reality that she is creating and the facts of the external world. Second and more important to our thesis here, the writer feels the need to get that created world right in terms of the self. Thus, the productions of the incubation must be understood in terms of both the external and internal realities. Free writing allows the student writer in the incu-

bation stage to touch most easily both realities with the new reality which is being created and incubated.

What, then, is the result of this process? What is the result of this free writing when it is used as a heuristic device to explore and generate information, when it is used as a way of knowing? We assert that the result is three types of knowledge are produced. These knowledges are subject-specific, self-specific and craftsman-specific.

It is important to see here that these three knowledges, being produced simultaneously, reject the traditional product-oriented view of writing and writing pedagogy which sees writing as a linear process in which the writer develops an idea then discretely thinks about that idea in terms of a form (commonly taught as outlining) and then the production of the product which, so the traditional product-oriented vision goes, should be an accurate verbalization of the initial idea. We know that this is not the way people write, and we know that writing is not a linear process. Neither is thinking. To force students into a linear model of the writing process is to reduce the student's potential as a writer by making unnatural demands and by reducing the student's potential knowledge which can inform the piece of writing in terms of the writer as person, the content of the writing and the audience for which the writing is intended.

The first of these knowledges which free writing produces is subject-specific knowledge. It focuses on the matter of the external world--the content out there. The student discovers what he knows about that matter by "Talking With Himself" about that matter. The writer is putting himself in touch with what he knows about that outer world and thereby enriching the new reality which is being created in the writing. Perhaps

even more important than the discovery of what he knows is the discovery of what he does not know because this discovery will cause him to consider and bring into some kind of focus those taps in his knowledge, and experience and this will allow him to fill in those gaps later by means of more formal, structured learning procedures. This leads to a third stage--the point of seeing what he WANTS to know; this opens great areas of learning which will inform the writing to be done later.

Clearly, this sort of knowledge was never accounted for in the traditional explanation of writing; that linear procedure simply assumed that the writer knew all that was necessary to know by the time the outline was finished.

The second of the areas, the self-specific, is the one which most closely touches the core of the idea we are exploring here, the holistic nature of writing as a process. The writer becomes aware of some of the affective factors of her nature and of some of the affective connectives between her personal, human self and the topic from the external world which serves as the core of the target. This is the discovery process which is taking place within the writer. Feelings, attitudes, likes, dislikes, fears, desires--all of these are just some of the affective responses which can be discovered by the act of free writing. Here is what Nystrand refers to as a heuristic act--the conscious discovery of new knowledge rather than the explicitive act (the recognition of what was previously known or what we refer to here as knowing what one knows.

Another area of self-specific knowledge which free writing generates is the knowledge that attitudes and values, opinions about the external target exist and are important before the writer consciously shapes the

content to fit the constraints of audience or topic. In short, the writer discovers that she does have an attitude or opinion toward the topic at hand and that that attitude is an integral aspect of her relationship with that matter from the external world. Hopefully the writer sees the essential honesty of that affective response and sees that that response is important in and of itself--beyond the requirements which may be imposed on the final written product. In short, the writer should understand, if only in an oblique way, that her human concern with the topic--that gossamer connection between inner and outer realities--exists and has importance far beyond the teacher's instruction that all papers must take a stand on the topic at hand. Free writing, that intermediate stage between talking to one's self in the privacy of one's own head and the public utterance which is written language, encourages the writer to see that her affective responses are valuable in themselves and are inextricably bound up in her re-creation of reality that will become the final written product.

The point here is that often writers do not recognize their affective responses to elements of the external and internal worlds, but once the writer, using free writing techniques, puts those responses on paper they are there to be dealt with; they have achieved a tangible, linguistic reality of their own. Now, they can become the subjects for additional incubation--thought and affective response--and in this way the heuristic dialectic adds to the writer's stockpile of knowledge.

The third type of knowledge produced by free writing in the incubation stage is what we call craftsman-specific knowledge. The free writing process produces a lot of what Peter Elbow calls "garbage," but in the midst of this gush, this flow of ideas and words, come questions

about what to do with all this "stuff." Part of the thinking, the discovery process itself, will concern the ordering or organizing of the ideas being generated. Donald M. Murray in an essay called "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning" asserts that one way of viewing the writing process is to see it as involving four functions: collecting, connecting, reading and writing. Collecting is analogous here to the generation of self-specific and particularly subject-specific knowledge. Connecting occurs, Murray states, because "We are compelled to provide some order for the confusion of writers' generated information...." This connecting process then leads to a process of generation of knowledge about what to do with the jumble of matter that has been produced. It leads to some of the larger matters of writing--the more rhetorical concerns and the consideration of some possible ways of dealing with this content, some ways of connecting material. Thus, the writer, to a limited degree, sees or feels the balance of form and content and the relationship--that form follows content. This is a far cry from the traditional, product-oriented approach which advocates that form is dictated by handbooks or essay readers by means of their human intermediaries, the English teacher, and that form is something totally separate from the real person of the writer or the real nature of the content.

This third type of knowledge seems to be the one least fully developed by the process of free writing in the incubation stage, but it will develop more fully in the later stages of the writing process. However, it is worth pointing out here that this craftsman-specific knowledge is not to be confused with concern about surface error. Far too often student writers are preoccupied with surface error--spelling,

grammar and the like--in the pre-writing stages, and this preoccupation is often a serious inhibitor of the processes of information generation and discovery. Student writers must be helped to see that surface correctness should not be a concern in the early stages of the writing process because the revision/reformulation stage is the proper place for concern with "error."

The whole writing process is a recursive process, and the pre-writing stage is highly recursive. The use of free writing allows for this recursiveness in a way that encourages a maximum of knowledge generation with a minimum of inhibition and evaluation, two things which at this stage in the writing process restrict knowing and learning. Free writing becomes, then, a heuristic procedure producing, in a painless fashion, knowledges which become means to further knowledge. It provides the writer, particularly the reasonably inexperienced student writer with a means of getting in touch with the realities of the external and internal world of the self while offering a means of discovering ways of understanding and organizing those realities in the process of creating that new reality which is the ultimate result of the writing process itself.